Global trolling: The case of "America First"

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Abstract

This study examines a global trolling event, "America First," with the intention to identify whether global trolling exists, and if so, what trolling behaviors and tactics characterize global trolling. Through an analysis of sixty videos from different countries that featured "America First" as their common theme, we were able to focus on the specific cultural manifestations of global trolling. Back in 2017, the videos were posted over a three-week period and they all exhibit repetitive, provocative, pseudo-sincere, and satirical trolling behaviors. While trolling behaviors crossed national boundaries, at times they were correlated with Hofstede's dimensions of cultural diversity. Future research may examine the extent to which these relationships exist in other global trolling events.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on global trolling, as it manifests itself on YouTube in the form of videos with overt satirical political content. While early research focused attention on deviant behaviors and malevolent trolling [1], more recently the focus shifted to satirical, ideological, collective, and political trolling from countries around the globe [2, 3, 4]. Some scholars studied motivation behind trolling behavior [5, 6], while others focused on the perceptions and reactions to trolling [2]. However, there is much about online trolling that is not well understood. Furthermore, only some prior research on trolling can be generalized, because forms of trolling and types of perpetrators have diversified with time. One understudied aspect of trolling is its global reach.

There is research on specific cases of trolling from the USA [7, 8], UK [9, 10, 11], China [4, 12], Israel [6, 13], Italy [14], New Zealand [15], and Russia [16]. Collectively, these studies raise a question about the extent and nature of trolling globally. Specifically, it is unclear to what extent motivations, perceptions, and reactions to trolling behavior differ from one country to another. One would expect both similarities and differences in global trolling, because research suggests that trolling behaviors differ from one socio-technical context to another; different communities and different platforms interact differently with online trolling. Furthermore, it is also unclear if global trolling can involve more than one country. It is possible, for example, that shared motivations or ideology can bridge over national, socio-cultural, and geographical boundaries on online platforms.

Studying global trolling seems to be timely and necessary because of the rise in media accounts of Chinese and Russian trolling, and the proliferation of the "state-sponsored trolling" phenomenon [17, 18, 19, 20]. Specifically, there is a need to address questions about global trolling, such as: What are the signs of and motivations for global trolling? What tactics and behaviors characterize global trolling? How do these resemble other trolling manifestations? How does culture impact global trolling events?

We designed a study that analyzes YouTube videos with the "America First" theme, from sixty countries, as a case of global trolling, in order to address these research questions: 1) To what extent is the "America First" event a case of global trolling? 2) What are the specific cultural manifestations of this global trolling event? This study is unique and timely in that it focuses on global and ideological trolling, and it analyzes internet videos as a medium of trolling.

2. Background

There is no consensus on the definition of trolling or what even constitutes it; trolling behavior ranges in manifestations, meanings, contexts, and effects. Trolling is defined here as [1, p. 6]: "a repetitive, disruptive online deviant behavior by an individual toward other individuals or groups". However, because we are focusing on the "America First" event, countries rather than individuals are at the center of our trolling attention.

Research on online trolling has focused mainly on trolling behaviors [21] and tactics [22], motivations to troll [6], enabling factors on social media, and

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perceptions of and reactions to trolling [23]. Trolls are driven by motives that range from political and ideological to malevolent to personal enjoyment [5], revenge and thrill seeking [6, 24]. While early research focused attention on deviant behaviors and malevolent trolling, the focus has now shifted to satirical, ideological, collective, and political trolling from countries around the globe [4, 12, 14, 16]. With regards to this paper, studies of collective, ideological and satirical trolling cases of American, Chinese and Russian trolls are most applicable [4, 12, 14, 16, 22].

Scholars report on ideological and political trolling from around the globe through examples from China, Italy, and the USA [4, 12, 16, 22]. The examples include: 1) ideological trolling by the Kremlin troll that is believed to be paid by a foreign government – in this case Russia [16]; 2) fake political accounts, which are humorous social media accounts; Italy uses satire as a form of activism [14] by assuming fake identities and taking advantage of anonymity on online platforms; 3) likewise social and political ideology drive trolling behaviors in the USA, using satire and humor [21, 22]. Political satire, in any media, implies the act of mocking conventions [25], and thus seems to serve trolling actions very well [22]. Politically driven trolling also occurs between countries, and in a recent report by The Institute for the Future, the authors describe how state-sponsored online hate and harassment campaigns are being used to intimidate and silence government critics at scale [19]. Moreover, Russian troll farms and Chinese collective trolling are reported to utilize humor and sarcasm in political or popular culture trolling events [4, 12].

Trolling behaviors include provocativeness, intentionality, repetitiveness, pseudo-sincerity, and satire [3, 6]. Trolls can employ specific tactics to be provocative in specific situations [22], for example, through various outrage tactics such as lying, name-calling, insulting, or simply through the use of vulgar language [26].

Satire and ideological trolling are of particular interest, given that they seem to be a ubiquitous part of online interactions [22]. Humor "is defined as an amusing social experience that 'benignly' violates norms" [27, p. 3], and trolls are known to violate community norms malevolently [6], or use community norms satirically to promote their ideology [22]. While humor involves appropriate violations of communication norms, malevolent trolling involves aggressive and inappropriate violation of norms. What is appropriate is subjective and varies across cultures [27]. This context-dependent nature of humor becomes even more complex when considering also the sociotechnical context of this global trolling [21] in which the America First event took place.

Unfortunately, there is no cross-cultural research on trolling [1], or satire trolling, and very little cross-cultural research on humor [27]. However, it was found that in collectivistic culture (China, Korea, and Thailand, for example) humor was used for group bonding and individuals used self-deprecating humor, while individuals in individualistic countries (such as the Canada, Germany, and US) were more likely to use self-enhancing humor [27].

3. Method

In order to address the research questions, we choose a global trolling event that was reported in Vanity Fair on February 5, 2017 by Laura Bradly, who wrote an article titled "Europe is Trolling Trump". What began as the European trolling phenomenon turned quickly into a global trolling event with over 50 countries involved from around the globe.

3.1 Data collection

Data, in the form of brief videos, were publicly available online. Using a snowball method and following an initial sample from the article by Laura Bradley, "Europe is Trolling Trump" (February 5, 2017), data was collected from February 6 to February 24, 2017 on four separate dates. Only publicly available videos have been captured and saved as files on shared folders for future analysis. We collected 100 videos and analyzed a total of 60 videos from various countries. Included in our sample are those videos that have been published in February 2017 with the repeated theme, "America First [country name] Second". Each video provides a parody version on Trump's inauguration comment "America First" and then typically included humorous reasons why that country should be considered second.

The videos that have not been included in our sample are those that represent regions, such as Europe or the Muslim World, and unrecognized countries and other entities, such as Mars, Westeros, Commander Geek, or Teen responses. All the videos are in English and they all begin with a variation of the statement "this is a message from the government of [country name]". Typically, there was only one video per country, and in cases where there were 2 videos from a single country (India and Israel), we included only the first video that was published from this country.

3.2 Data analysis

Sixty out of these 100 videos were then uploaded into Nvivo 12, a software for qualitative data analysis.

At the time we completed our data analysis many of the videos had been removed and were no longer available online. A coding scheme was developed from the data, using an iterative process of coding and discussion among the three authors. Each code was described and an example was provided to assure coding reliability; codes with frequency of less than 10 instances where removed, as they were not significant enough for further analysis. Codes were grouped into four broad categories: trolling behaviors, trolling tactics, structural codes, and content. The unit of analysis for categories trolling behavior, trolling tactics, and structural codes were the video as a whole. As for the content category, the unit of analysis for coding was 15-second intervals; coding involved assigning codes to each 15-second segment of the video. Two coders coded the data and an intercoder reliability test was conducted on 10% of the videos by a third coder. Intercoder reliability was high at 91.4% with a Cohen Kappa of K=0.829.

The videos' lengths ranged from 1:46 minutes (Russia) to 12:19 minutes (Germany), with an average of 4:07 minutes. There was a significant correlation between the length of video and country rank on Hofstede's Individualism/Collectivism (r=-.66, p<.05) and length of video and country rank on Hofstede's Indulgence dimension (r=-.29, p<.05) [28]. Collectivist cultures are considered to be less direct (more indirect) and less succinct (more elaborate) compared with individualistic cultures, which might explain why collectivistic countries had longer videos than individualistic countries [29, 30]. Furthermore, longer videos were correlated with countries that suppress individual gratification and regulate it through strict social norms. A little over half of the videos (52%) included an English narrator, most of the videos (84%) included subtitles in English and/or their local language, a closing request in the majority of videos (93%) to have their own country second (or even tenth in one instance), and half of them (52%) included an introduction that puts that video in a context of a local satirical TV show, in their own local language.

4. Findings and Discussion

To gain a better understanding of the global trolling phenomenon, we present our findings and discuss them under two sections, each addressing one of the research questions: 1) To what extent is the "America First" event a case of global trolling? 2) What are the specific cultural manifestations of this event?

Unlike any trolling event on online platforms that potentially include participants from all over the world,

this trolling event is a global event, as it includes videos from 60 countries. Each video 1) starts with the claim that this video provides a message from the government of a specific country; 2) ends with the claim that the specific country is second; 3) includes many references to the specific country culture, food, people, leaders, and beauty; 4) makes references to the United States' culture, food, government, and people; and 5) mocks the newly elected leader (at the time) of the United States, president Donald Trump.

4.1 "America First" event as global trolling

To address the first research question, we identify the nature of this global trolling event by describing the trolling behaviors and tactics we found in our data and examining them in light of online trolling research.

Overall, we found that the most frequent codes are the main categories, with references to Trump (#198) and the use of Trump language (#193), as well as to trolling behaviors (#157); these appeared in all the videos and were coded more than once per video. Specific codes that appeared frequently include references to the culture of the (video) sponsor country (#190), and references to another country (#129), as well as the use of the hyperbole trolling tactic (#114), in which the video exaggerates one's strengths or another's weaknesses. Clearly the frequent references to Trump are unique to this case study and are expected as this is the subject of the videos. The frequent references to sponsor country and to other countries in all the videos is indicative of the global and international scope of this event. Finally, the common utilization of trolling behaviors, and specifically the hyperbole tactic in the videos, supports the argument that this event is an instance of (global) trolling.

Furthermore, typical trolling behaviors [3], such as repetitive, provocative, pseudo-sincere, and satirical trolling behaviors, characterize all sixty videos. Holistically, the videos exhibit a repetition of satirical provocation by mocking Trump's inauguration speech and his "America First" campaign. The repetition occurs not only across videos, but also within a single video. The most extreme manifestation of repetition is in the China video that involved nothing but clips of Trump's repeatedly saying "China," at various speeches and interviews. Similarly, a repetition of clips of Trump referring to "Denmark" appears as part of the Swedish video. This repetitive trolling behavior by all contributors continued for a two-week period, resembling the repetition pattern of other events, such as in the case of Chinese collective trolling [4], or state-sponsored trolling activities [19]. The duration of the Chinese collective trolling repetitions was a few

days, but state-sponsored trolling can last longer than a couple of weeks, with several picks. The "America First" event continued for about three weeks. This might be because the production of video is significantly more time consuming than simply posting a text message or image on Facebook, Twitter, or Weibo. Another possible explanation is due to the fact that a global spread of an idea takes longer as it crosses geographical, national, language, and cultural boundaries.

As can be seen in Table 1, the "America First" global trolling event involved typical trolling tactics [22]. The most common tactics include the hyperbole arguments (23% of all tactics), which exaggerate the weaknesses of Trump, US, or other countries, or the strengths of their own country.

Table 1. Trolling tactics

Tactic	Description	#	%
Hyperbole	Exaggerating one's strengths or another's weaknesses.	114	23
Insulting	Statement meant to insult an individual or group of people.	44	9
Personal Attacks	Statement meant to target an individual.	17	4
Sarcasm (Other)	Using irony to mock other countries.	24	5
Sarcasm (US)	Using irony to mock the US.	29	6
Swearing	Using vulgar language, usually to elicit a reaction.	16	4
Derailment tactic	Purposefully leading a conversation off course, including: latching onto an unimportant detail; going completely off topic; inserting oneself into a conversation uninvited.	77	15
Insane troll logic	Refers to claims that cannot be argued against because they are so absurd and detached from reality that they are nonsensical; entails arguments so blatantly illogical that people assume that it must be done on purpose or that the arguer must be "crazy."	33	7
Lying tactic	Making an untrue statement, from simply lying to pure fantasy.	36	7
Misappro-priation of jargon	Adopting and playing with normative speech patterns for the group.	26	5
Politeness tactic	Use of polite language such as "thank you" and "please" in trolling.	69	14
Straight man tactic	Responding to others in an overly serious manner; for ex. taking humorous or sarcastic comments literally.	8	1

A typical example appears in the Sweden video, as the narrator, using Trump's voice and intonations, argues: "Sweden is the best country of all of Europe. Better than the Netherlands, better than Switzerland, and especially better than Denmark." This was followed by the derailment tactic (15%), which involved leading the conversation off track by latching onto an unimportant detail, as the Sweden video exemplifies. The narrator started with an articulation of Sweden's strengths, while mentioning Denmark, but switched into making insulting comments on the Danish people, saying that they are the "Mexicans of the Scandinavia," and then included random clips of Trump saying "Denmark" at his various speeches, jumped into the "nuke Denmark" comment, mentioned IKEA, and finally followed with comments on the Trump organization, meatballs, furniture, and the wall to Mexico. Another common tactic was the politeness tactic (14%), which involved the use of "thank you," "please," or honorific mention, such as "Dear Mr. President". The repetitive politeness mocks the president, but also addresses him with appropriate honorific; in this context, it adds a sarcastic tone in the opening of all the videos.

Likewise, other trolling tactics found in our analysis included insulting (9%), lying (7%), sarcasm (towards others (6%) or the US (6%)), misappropriation of jargon (5%), swearing (4%) and personal attacks (4%) (Table 1). These trolling tactics resemble those identified in individual satire trolls' posts [22]. While each tactic on its own may not constitute trolling, the amalgamation of tactics and trolling behaviors, repeated over and over again, does.

Thus, we conclude that the "America First" case of global trolling resembles individual trolling behaviors and tactics, with a global manifestation that is ideological and collective.

4.2 Cultural manifestations in "America First" global trolling event

Addressing the second research question, we focus attention on cultural manifestations in global trolling. Overall, each of the videos demonstrates a unique cultural manifestation of the sponsor country in a global context, referencing other countries and the US. The "America First" global trolling event provides

common grounds for localization of culture, language, food, flags, and also historical and political statements.

All the videos include cultural references (#67), and the most common theme includes instances of sponsor (country) culture (#190). The videos mention frequently local conflict in the sponsor country (#27), and global events (#13), such as the war in Syria, and they also make references to their own relationships with the US (#41). However, there are significantly more references to entertainment (#48) or music (#40), mentioning the Eurovision song contest, or the Brazilian carnival, for example. There are many instances of references to American culture (#91), and more specifically to the American flag (#82), landmarks (#27) such as the Statue of Liberty, Hollywood (#24), and American history (#10). At the same time, there are as many references to the sponsor country's flag (#85), and significantly more references to their own culture (#190), history (#82), food (#40), and tourist sites (#39). It should be noted that the first video, from the Netherlands, included more references (#7) to the American culture than any other video (two references to American culture per video on average).

We can conclude that there are noted similarities across the various videos in this global trolling event. However, we were curious to identify specific cultural manifestations that vary between the videos, potentially representing national cultural diversity. We choose Hofstede's dimensions [28] for further analysis of trolling behaviors and tactics. Since we found scores for Hofstede's dimension for only 36 of the 60 countries, the following analysis includes only that subset of countries.

We found that "Trolling behaviors" was negatively and significantly correlated with Power Distance Index (PDI) (r(28)=-.465, p=.01), and that PDI was also significantly negatively correlated with the straight man trolling tactic (r(37)=-.517, p=.001). PDI refers to "the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally" [28, p. 9]. Videos from low PDI countries (such as Austria, Denmark, Israel, Sweden, and Switzerland) had higher frequency of trolling behaviors and use of the straight man tactic than videos from high PDI countries (such as Columbia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Morocco, Philippines, and Russia). It seems that low PDI characterizes societies that are more equal, where pluralistic governments are elected and changed peacefully by a majority vote, and corruption is rare; this might provide a better socio-technical environment for trolling, and satire more generally, than in unequal societies where corruption is frequent, and autocratic governments are expected to change by a revolution. PDI "tend to be higher for East European, Latin, Asian

and African countries and lower for Germanic and English-speaking Western countries" [28, p. 10].

Cultural differences may help explain this finding, as in many East Asian countries; for example, high PDI countries justify their power structures with the Confucianism philosophy, which "asserts that the stability of society is based on five unequal relationships between individuals: ruler/subject, father/son, older brother/younger brother, husband/wife, and older friend/younger friend" [27, p. 17]. Thus, it is possible that in high power distance countries, blatant trolling may be less acceptable because of efforts to avoid face attack. "Eastern subordinates are less inclined to display humor in front of their leaders for fear of offending them" [27, p. 17]. However, it is also possible that another intervening variable may cause the lower level of trolling behaviors in these countries. Specifically, in countries with authoritarian regime, blatant trolling behaviors may be less likely to occur, either due to higher likelihood of censorship or because of the fear of possible consequences offline, resulting from the perceived lack of online anonymity. If this is the case, it might provide a plausible explanation for the lack of research on trolling in high PDI countries, compared with the proliferation of research on trolling in lower PDI countries. Future research may examine this proposition further.

We also found that Masculinity Index (MAI) was negatively and significantly correlated with the "Insulting" tactic (r(19)=-471, p=.042). MAI "refers to the distribution of values between the genders … [from] very assertive and competitive and maximally different from women's values on the one side, to modest and caring and similar to women's values on the other. The assertive pole has been called 'masculine' and the modest, caring pole 'feminine.'" [28, p. 12]. "Masculinity is high in Japan, in German speaking countries, and in some Latin countries like Italy and Mexico; it is moderately high in English speaking Western countries; it is low in Nordic countries and in the Netherlands and moderately low in some Latin and Asian countries like France, Spain, Portugal, Chile, Korea and Thailand." [28, p. 12]. Videos from countries that are high on MAI (such as Japan or Hungary) had little to no occurrence of "Insulting", while countries that were low on MAI, and high on femininity (e.g., Denmark), were more likely to use "Insulting" messages in their video; however, these were too few instances to draw strong conclusions. Future research may examine the relationships between MAI and trolling, and more specifically, the extent to which femininity is more likely to foster trolling behaviors, or simply to allow insulting language.

Further, we found that Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) was significantly and negatively correlated with "Sarcasm" tactic (r(8)=-758, p=.029). UAI "deals with a society's tolerance for ambiguity. …Uncertainty avoiding cultures try to minimize the possibility of [unstructured, unusual, novel, and surprising] situations by strict behavioral codes, laws and rules, disapproval of deviant opinions, and a belief in absolute Truth." [28, p. 10]. Videos from countries with strong UAI index (e.g., Greece, Turkey, and Russia) did not use sarcasm in their videos, while countries with weak UAI used more sarcasm (e.g., Hong Kong, and Malaysia). UAI "tend[s] to be higher in East and Central European countries, in Latin countries, in Japan and in German speaking countries, lower in English speaking, Nordic and Chinese culture countries." [28, p. 11]. Since sarcasm involves expression of ideas by using language that normally signifies the opposite for humoristic purpose, it creates ambiguity, and it is not used as often by countries with strong UAI. These countries do not accept deviance and aim to reduce confusion and ambiguity, compared to countries that utilize sarcasm and tolerate uncertainty. Furthermore, since humor involves risk, in countries with strong UAI, where individuals are risk averse, we can expect to find lower levels of sarcasm [27].

There is evidence that humor is a culture-dependent construct and that it varies across culture [27]. Both trolling and humor involve (appropriate) violations of norms, and require cognitive flexibility. Given that both norms and cognitive styles vary across cultures, it is not an anomaly that we found correlations between trolling behaviors and culture. In fact, past research suggests that there is a significant difference in humor between Western and Eastern cultures [27] ("[a]long with the perception that Easterners are less creative than Westerners, there is also a common perception that Easterners are less humorous than Westerners" [27, p. 15]), but unfortunately there is very little cross-cultural research on humor.

However, we found that regardless of the variation in local manifestations of culture, this global trolling event had much in common across cultures. First, despite the common claim that 'humor doesn't travel well' it is clear that "the desires to be creative and humorous appear to be universal across different cultures." [27, p. 9]. By taking a satirical stance on Trump's America First policy these videos can perhaps alleviate anxiety and stress over his future actions on the international stage. This clearly triggered a global surge of creativity by producers of these videos. Creativity, like humor, is also culture-dependent, and it also involves violation of norms and cognitive flexibility [27].

5. Conclusions

This study examined a global trolling event, "America First," with the intention to identify whether global trolling exists, and if so, what trolling behaviors and tactics characterize global trolling, and what are the specific cultural manifestations of global trolling. We found that this is indeed a case of global trolling, exhibiting repetitive, provocative, pseudo-sincere, and satirical trolling behaviors, across all videos, regardless of sponsored countries. We also found that while trolling behaviors were common across national boundaries, trolling tactics and behaviors, at times, correlated with Hofstede's dimensions of cultural diversity [28]. Specifically, countries with high PDI were less likely to exhibit trolling behaviors than those with low PDI score.

The major contribution of the study includes the identification of specific trolling manifestations that cross national boundaries and those that align with Hofstede's dimensions. Typical trolling behaviors, such as repetitive, provocative, pseudo-sincere, and satirical trolling behaviors, characterize all sixty videos, representing sixty countries. This study demonstrates that trolling behaviors are global in nature, and by doing so, it extends prior research on trolling that focused on trolling in particular countries, mostly Western countries. Furthermore, cultural differences, offline and online, attracted much prior research, and this study expands this research into the realm of political and humoristic trolling. Specifically, this study demonstrates specific ways in which trolling varies across countries and the ways in which trolling behaviors are shared across countries, and by doing so, it extends prior research.

Future research may examine the extent to which these relationships exist in other global trolling events, and whether other competing variables are at play, instead of cultural dimensions.

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